

Mill River Flood Stereographs

Digital

1874

19 items (0.1 linear ft.)

Call no.: PH 019

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The Mill River flood of 1874 was one of the great man-made disasters of late nineteenth century western Massachusetts. Following the collapse of an earthenwork dam on May 16 of that year, 600,000,000 gallons of water coursed through Williamsburgh, Skinnerville, and Leeds, destroying factories and homes, bridges and roads, and leaving 139 deaths in its wake.

The nineteen images in the Mill River Flood collection are a small sampling of a series of 110 stereographs taken by the Knowlton Brothers of Northampton to document the devastation caused by the flood of May 1874. The collection also includes one view taken by F. J. Moore of Westfield, who issued his own series of 21 stereographs, and one by an unidentified photographer.

See similar SCUA collections:

Environment

Massachusetts (West)

Photographs

Background on Creator:

The Mill River flood of 1874 was one of the great man-made disasters of late nineteenth century western Massachusetts. Early in the century, the combination of high hills and rapid water encouraged the construction of a string of mills up and down the Mill River Valley, with as many as six mill villages rising up to take advantage of the cheap and abundant source of power. Factories for the production of silk and woolen cloth, buttons, brass and iron, and a variety of other products lined the banks of the river, supporting a growing population of workers.

By the 1860s, mill owners began to recognize that the natural, seasonal variation in water level in the Mill River could be evened out by damming the river, and in 1864, they began work on constructing a large earthenwork dam just above the town of Williamsburgh. Weighing the cost of the project, however, they decided to economize by designing and building the dam themselves, and cutting further corners and cost during the actual construction. Despite complaints from the surveyor and workers that these measures were potentially compromising to public safety, work continued, and even the presence of leaks when the dam was first filled in 1866 did little to slow the project.

Following heavy rains on May 16, 1874, disaster struck. When the dam collapsed, 600,000,000 gallons were sent coursing downstream in a wall of water nearly 40 feet high in places. Despite efforts to warn the residents downstream, few heard the warning, and fewer still heeded it. When the waters finally subsided, 139 bodies were strewn in its wake, with nearly total devastation of the factories and homes, bridges and roads.

In following days and weeks, the state government, for one of the few times in its history, stepped in to lend \$120,000 assistance to rebuild the infrastructure, and despite a coroner's inquest that laid clear culpability for the disaster on the shoulders of the mill owners and engineers, no one was ever brought to account.

Scope of collection

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Inventory

Knowlton Brothers: No. 4. View from below Reservoir, showing break in both walls

1874

1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. 12. View at Williamsburgh Reservoir

1874

1 stereograph



Ruins of stone bridge, Leeds



Knowlton Brothers: No. 13. View of Geo. Cheney on his horse
1874
1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. 42. View showing ruins of Engine, etc., at Skinnerville
1874
1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. 57. View at Haydenville: Site of Hayden, Gere and Co.'s Brass Shops from above
1874
1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. 71. View in Main St., Leeds, wreck of engine house
1874
1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. 76. Quigley's house, Leeds, from the west
1874
1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. 81. Ruins of Geo. P. Warner's Button Factory, Leeds, from the west
1874

1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. 84. Ruins of Stone Bridge, Leeds
1874

1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. [88]. View at Leeds: View looking up Leeds St., near Button Shop
1874

1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. [95]. View at Leeds: Workmen searching for bodies near Cook's dam
1874

1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. 99. View of Hayden, Gere and Co.'s Brass Shops, Haydenville before the flood
1874

1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. [101]. View at Haydenville: View of Hayden, Gere and Co.'s Band Building and Office
1874

1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. 105. Cook's Dam and Iron Bridge, Leeds, before the flood
1874

1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: No. [107]. View at Leeds: Leeds from the Hill
1874

1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: Site of Wm. Skinner's Silk Mills, Skinnerville
1874

1 stereograph



Knowlton Brothers: View in Leeds Street
1874

1 stereograph



Moore, F. J.: No. 10. Hayden, Gere and Co's. Brass Foundry
1874 May 16

1 stereograph



Unidentified photographer: Cove at Williamsburgh where 20 bodies were found
1874

1 stereograph



Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from unknown source, 1994.

Processing Information

Processed by Dex Haven, August 2009.

Bibliography

See Sharpe, Elizabeth M., *In the Shadow of the Dam: The Aftermath of the Mill River Flood of 1874* (Free Press, 2004).

Digitized content

Digitized versions of the images in this collection have been added to SCUA's online repository, Credo.

Language:

English

Copyright and Use (More information)

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Search terms

Subjects

Floods--Massachusetts--Mill River Valley (Hampshire County)--Photographs.

Haydenville (Mass.)--Photographs.

Leeds (Mass.)--Photographs.

Mill River Valley (Hampshire County, Mass.)--Photographs.

Skinnerville (Mass.)--Photographs.

Williamsburgh (Mass.)--Photographs.

Contributors

Knowlton Brothers. [main entry]

Knowlton Brothers.

Moore, F. J.

Genres and formats

Photographs.

Stereographs.

Link to similar SCUA collections

Environment

Massachusetts (West)

Photographs



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